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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAGUA 001151

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/10/2018

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [NU](#)

SUBJECT: NICARAGUA: ANOTHER SETBACK FOR PRESS FREEDOM,  
POPULAR PUNDIT TAKEN OFF AIR

REF: A. 08 MANAGUA 989

[1](#)B. 08 MANAGUA 955

[1](#)C. 08 MANAGUA 866

[1](#)D. 08 MANAGUA 823

[1](#)E. 07 MANAGUA 669

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Callahan for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) For the second time in five months, outspoken political commentator Jaime Arellano was removed from the television airwaves after the owners of the independent television station Channel 2 succumbed to government pressure to cancel his morning talk show, "El Dos en la Nacion" (Two in the Nation). The move is widely seen as the Ortega Administration's latest attempt to silence and intimidate its critics, control the media, suppress freedom of expression, and consolidate its power. The Sandinista official media, namely Channel 4, Radio Ya, and its new weekly tabloid "El 19," have accused Arellano along with other media adversaries of "sowing hatred" and being part of a "neoliberal plot of corruption" against the Nicaraguan people. The Citizen Power Councils (CPCs), meanwhile, have been dispatched throughout Managua, mounting a "prayer campaign" against the media and journalists under the slogan "love is more powerful than hate." The cancellation of the Arellano show for the second time in less than a year also indicates that the Ortega government's communications strategy, developed by First Lady Rosario Murillo to use fear to scare media outlets into self-censorship, appears to be working. END SUMMARY

ADIOS, EL PINGUINO (GOODBYE MR. PENGUIN)

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Conservative-oriented political pundit Jaime Arellano, nicknamed "el pinguino" (the penguin), hosted a long-running popular morning talk show featuring prominent Nicaraguan intellectuals, politicians, economists, analysts, and others to debate, and analyze the Nicaraguan political situation. After Channel 10 (a station with ties to the Sandinista-operated Channel 4) took his show "El 10 en La Nacion" (Ten in the Nation) off the air in April, he moved over to Channel 2, considered the most independent TV station in Nicaragua, where he continued the same program under the new name of "El 2 en la Nacion." On August 22, the owners of

Channel 2, Octavio Sacasa and Martha Pasos de Sacasa, announced the cancellation of Arellano's show. According to multiple contacts, the decision was take under explicit threats from the Ortega Administration that Channel 2 would lose its broadcasting license, which is due to expire January 30, 2009, if they did not remove Arellano. (NOTE: They had previously told InfoOff that it was one of their top-rated programs. END NOTE.) In an official statement released August 27, Channel 2 excused the cancellation by claiming that Arellano's commentary was too inflammatory and asserting that the best defense for freedom of expression is to protect its "ethical practice" as a "social responsibility." Although Channel 2 recognized the need for constructive criticism and the freedom to question government policies that affect the people, it justified its decision to cancel Arellano's show on the grounds that "violence, whether verbal or physical, and insults, cannot be praised, from wherever they may come." Furthermore, Channel 2 asserted that it was not a media of the opposition because it represented no political party, rather it was an impartial, objective outlet without partisan or ideological bias or affiliation. The statement made no mention of government pressure or any influence it may have had on the station's programming decision.

¶3. (SBU) Arellano often generated controversy for his confrontational style and tendency to pontificate. He has been equally critical of the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) as he has of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Despite his aggressive style, his show served as a vigilant watchdog over Nicaragua's political and economic situation, highlighting government corruption and politicization of the judiciary, frequently railing against President Daniel Ortega's intentions to install a dictatorship and perpetuate himself in power. Even those who disagree with Arellano's style are alarmed by the Channel 2 decision, seeing it as an act of self-censorship and a dangerous precedent for Nicaraguan press freedom. Several sources consulted predict that Carlos Fernando Chamorro, who hosts another popular program on Channel 8 and is highly respected for his investigative journalism, will be the next significant television program forced off the airwaves. They also worry that Channel 2 is facing a similar fate as Venezuela's RCTV, an opposition media that was forced to shut down last year.

#### ANOTHER ACT OF INSTITUTIONAL TERRORISM?

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¶4. (SBU) In a passionately delivered press conference held the morning of August 25 at opposition-affiliated Radio Corporacion, Jaime Arellano asserted that he did not resent the owners of Channel 2 for their decision, stressing that while he had the right to put his own life on the line by criticizing the government, he did not have the right to expect others to share this risk. Arellano explained that members of the Channel 2 team were being harassed for their association with his morning show. He lamented that the Channel 2 decision had advanced the Ortega government's strategy of "institutional terrorism" to intimidate media owners. Arellano has been the target of death threats in the past, and now feels particularly exposed to violence. Pro-government Citizen Power Council (CPC) groups had staged protests outside Channel 2 for several days prior to the cancellation of Arellano's show and also gathered outside Radio Corporacion during Arellano's August 25 press event. Nevertheless, he exhorted his audience not to succumb to fear and blackmail, and vowed to continue to fight for democracy. He also announced his intention to present his case to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights and the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Liberal National Assembly deputies Eduardo Montealegre and Enrique Quinonez, running together on the PLC-Vamos con Eduardo ticket for the Managua mayorship, accompanied Arellano at his press conference, and voiced their solidarity in defense of democracy.

¶5. (C) Many critics of the Ortega government expect that these assaults on the independent media, including the threat

of pulling broadcasting licenses from television and radio stations, will continue. The fact that the Ortega Administration has demonstrated its intent to wield its power to renew or cancel a broadcasting license, or control the frequencies radio stations are allowed to access, is troubling to journalists and media owners, and hangs over the entire media sector like a "sword of Damocles." A number of radio station owners are opting for self-censorship rather than risk losing their media space. Radio 15 de Septiembre, a conservative radio outlet and defiant opponent of the Ortega government, is also facing the expiration of its license in January. Dora Maria Tellez, an activist within the dissident Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) and former Sandinista militant, told poloff that by caving in to the Ortega government's pressure, Channel 2 was falling into a trap set by Ortega and Murillo. This would also embolden similar attacks on other outlets and Nicaraguans who dare to criticize the government's actions. The removal of one of the strongest voices of opposition--Arellano--from TV demonstrates the use of fear and intimidation is working and signals that "no one was off limits." Furthermore, it represents one more in a series of incremental infringements on press freedom and freedom of expression accumulating since Ortega assumed office 20 months ago (Refs. A, B) and reflects that Murillo's communications strategy to exert full control over the media is in full operation (Ref. D.)

#### COMING TO THE DEFENSE OF PRESS FREEDOM

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¶6. (C) Concerned about the "chilling effect" that the Channel 2 precedent sets, and that it could pave the way for increased government control of the media environment, and in anticipation that licenses for other radio and television channels are soon due to expire, a number of Liberal National Assembly deputies are now attempting to push through a bill that would automatically renew media broadcasting licenses for ten years. This proposed reform to the Law for the Defense of Freedom of Expression, introduced by Eduardo Montealegre, has been sitting at the Commission for Education, Culture, Sports, and Social Communications Media since July 2007. At the same time, however, there is also a move underway to overhaul the telecommunications legislation, known as Law 200, which resides with the Committee on Infrastructure.

¶7. (C) According to media reports, FSLN deputies are maneuvering to block or delay the passage of law on freedom of expression by arguing that related media freedom issues will be covered under the more comprehensive telecommunications law. This is clearly a ploy to use the cover of the legislative process to exert greater control over media, because by the time the larger more complex telecommunication law passes, it will already be too late for some outlets whose licenses will have by then already expired. Furthermore, with Mario Valle -- a nominally independent deputy who consistently votes with the FSLN -- heading the commission with jurisdiction over media issues, the deck appears to be stacked against those legislators striving to defend an independent media. Civil society organizations, such as Movimiento por Nicaragua, are calling on the deputies to enact the law to extend media licenses. Although the private sector typically avoids commenting on political matters, the Superior Council of the Private Sector (COSEP) and the Nicaraguan American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) issued a joint public statement and press release on September 3 in support of the law to extend licenses and strongly affirming the need to protect freedom of expression as a right guaranteed by the Nicaraguan constitution. Montealegre told the Ambassador on September 8 that the Liberals have reached agreement to bring the issue of media licenses to the full National Assembly in the coming weeks and to hold a quick vote on a law to provide extension of the licenses. Terms of the legislation are still being worked out.

IS LOVE STRONGER THAN HATE?

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¶8. (C) In addition to using legal mechanisms to curtail media freedom, the Ortega Administration is increasing the use of its quasi-official media outlets and the Citizen Power Councils (CPCs) to discredit the opposition and media as "peddlers of hate and confrontation." Arellano was the first target of this campaign. Just prior to the cancellation of the Arellano show, on August 20, CPC squads, initially women from Managua barrios and self-proclaimed "Christians of the base" began congregating in front of Channel 2, La Prensa, and El Nuevo Diario, to protest against hate and "pray" for peace. They echoed the official government complaints against the opposition media and implored the "end of hatred." One protester accused Arellano of "spreading hate and poison" against the Nicaraguan people, saying that he never even talks about politics. Sporting white T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Love is Stronger than Hate" and the CPC symbol, written in Murillo's trademark pink font, they carried simple white crosses and signs with biblical quotes, playing religious music and hymns. These groups have now set up permanent camps at all the major traffic circles in Managua, contributing further to the government's intimidation campaign. Commenting on the CPC prayer circles, prominent Catholic bishop Monsignor Bernardo Hombach expressed his regret that religion was being politicized in an attempt to discredit the opposition media but doubted that these protesters had much credibility with the general public. This latest use of the CPCs is in keeping with Murillo's communications strategy to exert greater control over the opposition media (Ref. B).

¶9. (SBU) CPC operatives also congregated outside the Radio Corporacion offices during the Arellano press conference. Some fear that the CPC campaign combined with the negative media treatment emanating from Sandinista-controlled outlets could spark violence. They dismiss the CPC groups protesting for prayer and love at the traffic circles around Managua as a feeble attempt to sow fear, and discredit anyone critical of the government. Though we note that, with all major traffic circles "occupied" by CPCs, it would be difficult for opposition groups to mount the large-scale protests seen in June and July, CPC elements have demonstrated a willingness to engage in violence when confronting opponents. Because the police does not grant multiple permits for demonstrations in the same space, the CPC prayer campaign has also served to preempt other forms of protests.

¶10. (C) While the CPCs were "praying" for peace, love, and reconciliation, official Sandinista outlets continued to berate and discredit Arellano as both corrupt and a "fat devil." As if to justify the absence of Arellano from the airwaves, the FSLN's newly minted official tabloid style weekly, "El 19" (named in honor of the July 19 victory of the Sandinista Revolution), devoted a full page article accusing Arellano of being a political agitator and denouncing him for stealing money from the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications (TELCOR) during his previous employment with the Bolanos Administration. (NOTE: The official media have also added Arellano to their long-running television attack ad against Eduardo Montealegre and Jaime Chamorro, director of the leading center-right daily La Prensa, whom they have incessantly accused of corruption and being part of a neoliberal plot to steal from the Nicaraguan people. In another ominous sign of an increasingly weakened media, these partisan attack ads are no longer confined to Channel 4, and are now appearing on a variety of other "independent channels." END NOTE.)

COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) The National Assembly appears to be taking the latest threat to press freedom seriously and there is some optimism that it will pass legislative reforms to better protect freedom of expression. However, the FSLN's control over the Assembly's mechanics, continued infighting among the Liberals, and a focus on the municipal elections pose serious

obstacles to the effort. More ominously, the FSLN's effort to intimidate and pressure independent media and silence its critics, combined with its more aggressive use of official communication channels to discredit opponents, has placed a dark cloud over the media climate. The Channel 2 decision indicates that the media can be pressured, and perhaps manipulated, into self-censorship. By silencing one of the government's fiercest and most tenacious critics in Arellano, the government is sending a message to other media outlets that they could be the next target.

CALLAHAN